

Pastoral Reflection
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The woman who got Jesus to change his mind.

Concern for her daughter motivated the Canaanite woman in Matthew's Gospel account. It enabled her to be bold and persistent in approaching Jesus. She was unwelcome: a woman alone without a father, husband, or brother to speak for her in a man's world. She was a Gentile and therefore unclean. She has no name. Mark in his account refers to the woman as a Greek, a Syrophoenician, which would have been more contemporary and indicate a level of education and sophistication. But Matthew chooses the archaic and pejorative term that recalls the apostasy of the early Jews who worshipped Baal instead of the one God who called them from Egypt and cared for them.

The woman is a bother. The disciples want Jesus to send her away because she is loud and persistent. Jesus responds harshly that his mission is to recover the lost sheep of Israel and that it is not right to give the children's food to the dogs (a sign of the tension between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians in the community for whom Matthew writes). But the woman does not give up. She grabs the imagery Jesus uses and tosses it back to him: even the dogs eat scraps from their masters' table. Then Matthew presents a Jesus who can recognize her great faith, and he heals her daughter. The Gentiles are welcome in the Christian community. Faith matters more than lineage.

The only two Gentiles that Matthew brings into contact with Jesus during his public ministry are the Canaanite woman and the centurion (Matthew 8:5-13). Both are commended for their great faith, a faith expressed in trust despite seeming rebuffs.

The woman can be a model of speaking up and being persistent, even as an outsider. For me this has been an impetus in calling for the fullness of ministry, ordination, for women in the Catholic church. This is about the daughter, for all women, not just one's individual call. It is also about deepening our spirituality, acting on what we believe. We know that God is neither female nor male, yet our language betrays us when we hear only male pronouns in our androcentric tradition. What do women hear and incorporate when we reflect on being made in the image and likeness of God?

We who are the St. Cronan community are involved in many justice issues, issues that speak to the core of who we are as humans and as baptized people. In each of our heartfelt concerns we are called at various times to speak out, to call for healing, to try to get other people to listen, to change their minds, and to act on behalf of others who are marginalized, who are outsiders. Remembering the Canaanite woman and her daughter can give us the strength and courage to be bold and persistent.

Lynne Schmidt, SSND